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ABSTRACT

How did Oliver North, who appeared to be a criminal and a liar, become an American hero? First the context must be considered. The Iran-Contra Affair was extremely complex with actors ranging from Eugene Hasenfus to President Ronald Reagan and settings ranging from Nicaragua to Israel to Iran. This complexity extended to the televised hearings where a cacophony of voices asked questions, reprimanded lawyers, and presented reams of sometimes contradictory evidence. Part of North's appeal stemmed from his unified rhetorical vision which extended the familiar cold war rhetoric to include Arab terrorism. This coherence was attractive to many Americans. In addition, his rhetorical vision depicted the United States as the defender of the weak and the champion of democracy. Another part of North's appeal stemmed from his white knight, clean-cut, patriotic, handsome father and husband persona who fought three villains: communism, terrorism, and "the system." Many Americans feel enmity, fear, or frustration toward at least one of these three phenomena. Americans often feel powerless and many feel that one voice, one vote doesn't matter. North demonstrated that one person can make a difference. North's persona as the Christian, clean-cut all-American marine who was a loving husband and father, a secretive James Bond, a gun-toting cowboy who went against conventions, and an underdog, an individualist who stood up for his beliefs, won the hearts and minds of many Americans. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (RAE)

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Oliver North's Testimony before the U. S. Congress' Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and Nicaraguan Opposition: A Fantasy Theme Analysis

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From July 7 to July 13, 1987, Oliver North testified before the U.S. Congress' Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and Nicaraguan Opposition. Oliver North, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Marines, was a member of the President's National Security Council and in that role orchestrated elaborate undercover plans involving the sale of arms to Iran, the release of American hostages in Beirut, and the funding of the contras in Nicaragua. Before his televised testimony, Oliver North seemed a ruined man. He was projected as a fugitive, a criminal, and a sneak. Albert Hakim testified to earmarking large amounts of money for North and his family (Schorr, 1987). His secretary, Fawn Hall, told of the shredding and doctoring of documents (Church, 1987). Glenn Robinette testified to installing a $16,000 security system in North's home paid for by the Iran operation (Morganthau, 1987). Assistant Attorney General Charles J. Cooper reported that North told "boldface lies" to the lawyers sent over by Attorney General Edwin Meese (Schorr, 1987) and he bragged about violating the Boland amendment and possibly going to jail (Stengel, 1987). North was also accused of buying snow tires and hoisery with traveler's checks meant for the contras (Hackett & Sandza, 1987). In response to these charges, Rep. Dick Cheney said that North looks "like a man with a lot of legal problems" (Morganthau, 1987. p. 19).

The evidence suggested that North might have been "the biggest villain of all," believing "that he had not only a right but a duty to circumvent the law and the government he served and wage a war of his own" (Hackett & Sandoza, l987, p. 18). However, instead of condemning North, many viewers supported him. This support was illustrated by the amount of chaining that occurred in the form of telegrams, money, "Give

'em hell, Ollie" bumper stickers, t-shirts, and banners (Martz, Parry, Clift, DeFrank, & Thomas, 1987). Defense fund donations of $25 or $50 built up to $130,000 (North's, 1987); Western Union discounted the price of North's telegrams from $10.75 to $5.95 because of "heavy public demand" (Ollie's, 1987, p. A13); a spokesperson said the White House was "inundated with calls" in favor of North (King, 1987, p. 5), and an ABC News Poll reported that 64% of the American public perceived North as a victim and not as villain (Johnson, 1987). On the last day of testimony, North's lawyer Mr. Sullivan stated, "there are 20,000 telegrams in our room outside the corrider here that came in this morning" (751). Another source reported a foot-high pile of telegrams at the end of four days of testimony (Morrow, 1987).

This contradiction between the evidence, which indicated that North circumvented the law and lied to Congress and his superiors, and the strong public support North received poses an interesting rhetorical question, a problem I'm going to investigate in this paper: How did this man who appeared to be a criminal and a liar become an American hero?

JUSTIFICATION OF APPROACH

During his testimony North acknowledged that he had committed most of the infractions with which he was charged and referred to his testimony as telling "the good, the bad, and the ugly." He also admitted lying as

illustrated by the following excerpt:[1]

> Mr. Nields: So, what you're telling us is that you falsely told General Secord that you had had such a discussion with the President?
>
> Lt. Col. North: Yes (37)

North's testimony, therefore, consisted of two seemingly contradictory parts: his admission of lying to his superiors and to Congress, and committing crimes (the bad and the ugly); and his portrayal of himself as a hero (the good). In other words, it appeared that two opposing dramas were in operation; in one, North's persona was as a liar, a law-breaker, and a villain; and, in the other, a hero.

North's persona as a liar, law-breaker, and villain is supported by the factual evidence. However, in spite of this evidence, a large portion of the American people viewed him not as a villain but as a hero. I argue, therefore, that an analysis of the legal facts in North's case would not answer the question posed in this paper: Why did North become a hero to many Americans?

To answer this question, it is necessary to look at another part of his testimony, material based on creative dramatization (e.g. North's dramaticizing himself as a hero). Morrow (1987) concurs that it was North's "dramatics that captured America" (13). Because it was the drama of North's testimony that many Americans responded to, I have

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[1]All quoted material not otherwise specified is from Taking the Stand: The Testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Oliver L North, New York, Pocket Books, 1987.

chosen a dramatistic approach for this paper: a fantasy theme analysis[2].

THESIS

In this paper, I argue that Oliver North used the Cold War rhetorical vision, the Arab Terrorist fantasy type, and Big Guy-Little Guy dramatizations to become an American hero. As the hero of the Cold War rhetorical vision, he fought communism; as the hero of the Arab Terrorist fantasy type, he fought terrorism; and as the hero of the Big Guy-Little Guy dramatizations, he fought the powerful institutions and processes which cause individuals to feel powerless. North, therefore, was an American who is fighting three enemies: Communism, Arab terrorism, and the powerful big guys.

COLD WAR RHETORICAL VISION

Walter Lippmann is usually cited as the person who first used the term "Cold War" to describe the United States-Soviet conflict (Halle, 1967, 136). In effect, it was a clash between two ideologies. Cragan (1972) portrays the Cold War rhetorical vision as a global struggle between good and evil, between peace-loving nations and aggressor nations, between democracy and totalitarianism, between capitalism and communism...and between the United States and the Soviet Union (76, 77). He maintains that part of the Cold War vision is the Mission of America which sees the

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[2]A fantasy theme analysis is a form of rhetorical criticism that was developed out of Robert Bales' and Ernest Bormann's work in small group communication. For further explication refer to Bormann (1972, 1982,1983, 1985).

United States as a Christian democracy that is the last hope of mankind. The unit in this Christian democracy in the individual and America is the land of individual freedom. It is the duty of individual Americans, therefore, to spread the word of freedom.

Cragan (1972) also posits the dark side of America in this vision. Although many dramas depict young energetic people building democracy, others present a view of Americans as naive in the international sphere. Because the United States is an "immature traveler of the world" (83), Americans have been characterized as the underdog.

At the end of World War II, people realized that the atomic bomb could annihilate the world. As a result of this realization, "hot" wars became unpopular and the door opened for the popularity of the "cold" war. Cragan (I98I) lists the events that helped create the Cold War rhetorical vision:

> On July 2, I947, Russia and all eastern European countries rejected the Marshall Plan. On October 5, the Cominform was created. On November 21, opposition parties in Poland and Hungary were dissolved. On December 24, Greek gorillas formed a provincial government. On February 16, I948, the Czechoslovakian government fell. On June 20, the Berlin Blockade began. In I949, the Russians exploded an atomin bomb and the Chinese People's Republic was proclaimed. In I950, the Korean War began (54).

As these events occurred, most Americans began viewing communists and

communist conspirators as an extremely evil and dangerous villain. The Cold War vision continued through the 50's and into the 60's with Americans fighting communism in Vietnam. As Americans became disenchanted with their mission in Vietnam, the Cold War vision began to fade and by the 1970's the vision had lost much of its impact. Oliver North's testimony, however, demonstrated that the Cold War rhetorical vision is far from dead.

North conveyed his rhetorical vision, his view of reality, not in the direct answering of questions, but in asides when explaining his view of the world to the American public in statements such as "I think it is important for the American people to understand...." (12). In the Cold War rhetorical vision, America is in danger of communist attacks and invasions. In North's rhetorical vision, the attacks would likely come from Central America. He portrayed his vision:

> This nation cannot abide the communization of Central America. We cannot have Soviet bases on the mainland of this hemisphere. ...the worst outcome we could have would be the consolidation of a communist client state in Nicaragua and the spread of communism throughout the region (270).

North's rhetorical community was already conscious of communism knocking at its door; North was sustaining that consciousness. Implicit in this rhetorical vision is the assumption that when one country succumbs to communism, that change will cause a chain reaction and other countries

will also succumb. This chain reaction is also called the "domino theory" indicating that one country's "fall" to communism will precipitate the fall of other countries, the way a line of dominoes collapses after the first domino falls.

The underlying assumption of the Cold War rhetorical vision and the domino theory is that if America does not fight communism, it will be invaded by communists. North fed this fear when he presented his vision of the apocolypse:

> The consolidation of the communist regime in Managua will result in the spread of that revolution....You will see democracy perish in the rest of Central America, a flood of refugees crossing the American borders, and potentially, the construction of a Berlin-type wall across the Rio Grande to keep people out. Last week we authorized 200,000 Nicaraguans to stay in this country and that's just the tip of the iceberg (564).

In describing the immediacy of the situation, North stressed the need for action. In effect, he said that something must be done to halt communism and he was the one to do it.

Because North's audience was familiar with the Cold War rhetorical vision, he did not need to dramaticize it extensively. In fact, North seldom dramaticized Cold War fantasies. One of the few Cold War dramatizations concerned a young Nicaraguan "campasino" who gave up everything he had in order to fight the totalitarian communist regime (220).

ARAB TERRORIST FANTASY TYPE

North did not merely dramatize the evils of communism, he dramatized the evils of Arab terrorism. The Middle East was introduced in the person of the Ayatollah, a symbol of a country that embarrassed the United States during the hostage crisis and in the Persian Gulf. When North quipped, "it looks like the Ayatollah is going to have to help the freedom fighters a little longer" (36), his rhetorical community cheered because North pulled one over on Iran and they reveled in the irony of an anti-American and anti-democratic country helping the United States fight for freedom in Nicaragua. He again used the fantasy cue, "Ayatollah," stating, "...we weren't using the taxpayers' money, we were using the Ayatollah's money" (153).

The Ayatollah was, however, a secondary villain; the truly dangerous villain was Arab terrorism, introduced in the form of Abu Nidal (181) who had threatened North and his family. North dramatized a fantasy theme around Abu Nidal. He stated:

> Abu Nidal, the radical Palestinian guerilla leader linked to ...attacks in Rome and Vienna,--the so-called 'Christmas Massacre' in which 19 people died and 200 more were wounded.... Abu Nidal blasted the 11-year old American Natasha Simpson to her knees, deliberately zeroed in and fired an extra burst at her head" (183).

North used this dramatization to persuade his audience that he was justified in installing a security system, paid for by General Secord, in his

North used this dramatization to persuade his audience that he was justified in installing a security system, paid for by General Secord, in his home. Abu Nidal, however, was not merely an enemy of North's; he was an enemy to all Americans as evidenced by his shooting of an 11-year old American girl in the airport.

Later in his testimony, North discussed working toward the release of the hostages in Lebanon. He described meeting with relatives of hostages:

> ...it is a devastating experience to meet with a wife or the daughter or mother or son of a hostage repeatedly and see the anguish in their face, and know in your heart that your government can't, try as it would, can't do anything about it (502).

North, in describing the anguish of the hostage situation, not only built emnity for the terrorists, but also attempted to legitimize his role as the one who tried to free the hostages. He, as an individual, had to act because the government couldn't.

North briefly dramatized several fantasy themes in which Arab terrorists brutally attack and/or kill innocent Americans. He related the murder of Robert Stethem, a "young sailor...brutally mudered by the hijackers who took TWA 847" (504), and the murder of Leon Klinghoffer on the Achille Lauro. His most extensive dramatization was the story of Bill Buckley. He related that

> Mr. Buckley was healthy when he was taken. He was beaten severely. He was probably tortured considerably. A tortured confession of some four hundred pages was extracted from him.... Mr. Buckley probably died of the complications of pulmonary edemia--and that is that he'd been kicked so brutally in his kidneys that his lungs filled up with fluid, and he basically suffocated (505).

North continued the dramatization with his reaction:

> One of the most difficult things that I experienced in this rather lengthy ordeal...was to see the pictures that we were able to obtain, the video tapes, particularly of Bill Buckley as he died, over time. To see him slowly but surely being wasted away (506-507).

Oliver North, through his repeated dramatization of stories in which Americans were kidnapped, tortured, or killed by Arab terrorists, employed the Arab terrorist fantasy type. I suggest that in America, the Arab terrorist fantasy type has been evolving over the last decade as evidenced by the treatment of terrorist and hostage stories in the media. North did not create this type; he tapped into a pre-existing American fantasy and used it.

BIG GUY-LITTLE GUY DRAMATIZATIONS

The third thread running through North's testimony is Big Guy-Little Guy dramatizations. These dramatizations are different from the

preceding two in that they generally (but not always) involve interpretations of what is happening in the recent past and near future, with the here-and-now feeding into the dramatizations. Because the Big Guy-Little Guy dramatizations aren't narratives, the terms "fantasy theme" or "fantasy type" are inappropriate; hence "dramatizations." In these dramatizations, the big guy was the powerful Congress and its extension, the Congressional Committee. North was the little guy. North dramatized a version of the committee as all powerful:

> It's sort of like a baseball game in which you are both the player and the umpire. It's a game in which you call the balls and strikes and where you determine who is out and who is safe. And in the end you determine the score and declare yourselves the winner (264).

North continued with his view of the Congress:

> ...you will not investigate yourselves.... There is not much chance that you will conclude at the end of these hearings that the Boland Amendments and the frequent policy changes (concerning aid to Nicaragua) therefore were unwise...(264).

North described a process that was not fair, a process in which one party had all the power. The big guy had the right to question, investigate, and

tyrannize the little guy, but the big guy did not question or investigate its own actions.

North dramatized another evil of the Congressional Committee, its lack of respect for his privacy:

> I think it was insensitive of this Committee to place before the cameras my home address at a time when my family and I are under 24-hour armed guard by over a dozen government agents of the Naval Investigative Service because of fear that terrorists will seek revenge for my official acts and carry out their announced intentions to kill me (265).

In describing its lack of consideration for his family, North depicted the Committee as insensitive and unconcerned about human beings and their individual problems. Again, the Committee was the big guy who exerted its power over the little guy.

Another complaint North levied against Congress was "the fickle, vascillating, unpredictable, on-again off-again policy toward the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance" (266). North also frequently hinted that Congress was ineffective and bumbling, and feared that they would turn "Top Secret, code word documents...loose" (114). He referred to one major Congressional mistake that endangered American lives, the leaking of information about the mining of the harbours in Nicaragua. He reported:

> I was a part of...the coordination for the mining of the harbours in Nicaragua. When that one leaked, there were American lives at stake, and it leaked from a member of one of the committees (of Congress), who eventually admitted it (253).

He also referred to a "leak on the sensitive intelligence methods that we used to help capture the Achille Lauro terrorists" which "almost wiped out that whole channel of communications" (253). In addition, North worried that the Committee would turn Top Secret documents relating to his hearing loose. He stated:

> You know, one of the things that disturbs me about the way this is proceeding is that we constantly are coming back to the fact that the American people haven't been told everything. You're not going to make public all of this stuff when you get done with either, I hope. I mean there's Top Secret, code word documents that you've--that I've seen for the first time today in years, that I'm now having to look through. I pray to God you're not going to turn all these loose! (114)

In short, North depicted Congress and its extension, the Congressional Committee, as a powerful, complacent, and insensitive body that bungled. The complacency was particularly annoying in that Congress leaked information and was not entirely competent. The "Big Guy", then, is not only powerful, but insensitive to human feelings and moderately

incompetent.

This Big Guy-Little Guy motif was also developed by North's attorney, Mr. Sullivan. Sullivan depicted North as being picked on by the Committee. For example, when the prosecutor, Mr. Nields rephrased a question, Sullivan stated, "The witness has done it--answered that question, I think, ten times this morning...."(27). Later, Sullivan asked that North be allowed to answer the questions before the prosecution asked additional ones. He stated:

> ...my client is not permitted to answer....if you'd like to play the tape back, or read it back, it's quite clear that counsel jumped in before the answer was given. I...ask you for a fair judgment. That's all (242).

In these two examples, Sullivan portrayed the prosecution as picking on North by repeatedly asking the same question and by interrupting his responses.

At one point during the testimony, Chariman Inouye announced that there was a vote in the senate and that senators could leave. After they'd left, Sullivan quipped, "May I note...that the rules require that one Senator be present in order that there be a quorum" (167). When Senator McClure said that he was there, Sullivan stated, "I didn't see you hiding up there.... It's just that when there are so few of us over here and so many over there it's hard to keep track, Senator" (168). In this quotation, Sullivan was referring to the Committee's advantage and to North's disadvantage.

In the following situation, Sullivan not only referred to the power of

the Committee, but inferred that the Committee was using unfair tactics to win their case against North: Sullivan was upset about reports that the hearings could lap over into the following week. He stated:

> I don't want to prejudge the Committee, as some members of the Committee have prejudged Colonel North, but I suspect, sir, that what's happening here is we're meandering through questions in a disjointed fashion so that when it comes to Friday, you can say, Mr. Chairman, that it's necessary to continue on Monday or perhaps Tuesday. You know, as a trial lawyer I know a stall when I see one. There's never been a lawyer that tried a case that didn't know that stalling and putting a week-end in between a witness' testimony so you disect his examination and ask further questions on Monday is not a good tactic (156, 157).

In short, Sullivans portrayed the Committee as powerful and conniving tricksters who wanted to manipulate the situation to North's disadvantage.

PERSONA AND HERO

Cragan (l972) describes the heroes of the Cold War vision as "a montage of clean-cut Americans..., hearty descendants of the pioneers who cherished freedom, thrived on hard work, and lived by christian principles" (112). A typical hero was

> a God-fearing man who took pride in his work and pride in his family. He preferred to go about building a better life and caring for his family, but when God, country, and the American

> way were threatened he would throw down the plow, pick up the gun and answer the call of the patriot (113).

Cragan's description sounds tailor made for Oliver North. North presented himself as a patriot who "in 23 years of service...never violated an order (106). Throughout his testimony, North frequently referred to God and family. He proudly asserted:

> My best friend is my wife Betsy to whom I have been married for nineteen years, and with whom I have four wonderful children, aged 18, 16, 11, and 6 (261).

When responding to the charge that he had used travelers' checks intended for the Contras for his own purposes, North testified that he occasionally used personal funds to cover out-of-pocket costs and then used Contra funds to reimburse himself. He testified that he asked his wife:

> "Did I ever go to Parklane Hoisery?" And you know what she told me? "Of course you did, you old buffoon, you went there to buy leotards for our two little girls (191).

North presented himself as a family man who participated in normal family activities such as shopping for childrens' clothing. His persona was a dutiful patriot, a faithful husband, and when possible, an involved father. Representative Fascell refers to this persona when he said, "millions of

people around the country have applauded your sterling character" (555).

North's persona also included his role as hero. He responded to the need of a nation in distress and although he hated to, he spent time away from his family to fight the evil villain of Communism. Throughout his testimony, he stressed his individual efforts to keep communnism from America's door. He affirmed his own heroism:

> I don't think there's anyone else in the United States of America that worked as hard as I did to ensure: a) a dramatic outcome, and b) the survival of the Nicaraguan resistance from 1984 to 1986 (550).

Cragan (l972) also mentions that part of the composite American hero is the underdog because internationally, Americans are innocent and naive. North's persona also included the underdog. In the Big Guy-Little Guy dramatizations, North is the little guy, the underdog.

Because the Cold War could not be fought out in the open; it was fought behind closed doors. It was a psychological war (Cragan, l981) and a covert war (Ball, l988). One type of hero in such a war is the master of covert activities, a James Bond. An additional facet of North is his James Bond persona. When North recounted activities involving actors with code names and countries with code numbers, the audience entered the world of the spy. North described this world:

> By their very nature covert operations or special activities

> are a lie. We make every effort to deceive the enemy as to our intent, our conduct and to deny the association of the United States with those activities....The effort to conduct these covert operations was made in such a way that our adversaries would not have knowledge of them, or that we could deny American association with it.... And that is not wrong (12).

North claimed that lying to the American public and lying to Congress was acceptable and necessary. It was North's James Bond persona that made this lying acceptable.

Another facet of North's persona was the archetypal American hero, the cowboy. The constraints of town living were too confining for the cowboy and the constraints of the legislative process were too confining for North. By circumventing the normal processes and procedures, North was able to get things done. Senator Trible recognized North's "ability to get results in a city so often tied in knots" (538). This cowboy persona has also been labeled his Rambo persona. Both the cowboy and Rambo did not survive by regulations and laws; they kept their guns loaded and were quintessential individualists Like North, they viewed the world as a dangerous place.

North's underdog persona seemed contradictory to his James Bond and cowboy persona. On the one hand, North is the victim of the system and on the other he gets things done by circumventing the system. I suggest that this apparent contradiction in his persona may have contributed to the dramatic impact of the hearings. Those who cheered for North as a hero,

felt sympathy for him as the victim of the system he was fighting. He became the "hero caught," and the dramatic impact was similar to moments in film when it appears that the bad guys will win such as when Superman is loosing power from green kryptonite.

North further developed his heroic stature by frequently referring to his contact with President Reagan and their sharing of goals. He also alluded to plans such as Project Democracy and the Reagan Doctrine that were larger than his operations, and used phrases such as "human freedom on the March" to increase his stature. His efforts and days also touched on the heroic; he gave himself to the cause. He stated:

> The average work day lasted at least fourteen hours. To respond to various crises, the need for such was frequent, and we would often go without a night's sleep, hoping to recoup the next night or thereafter (263).

To summarize, the persona of Oliver North during his testimony was complex. He embodied not only a Christian, clean cut all-American marine who was a loving husband and father, but a secretive James Bond, a gun-toting cowboy, and an underdog.

CONCLUSION

I return to the original question. Why did Oliver North become a hero to many Americans? First, we must consider the context. The Iran-Contra Affair was extremely complex with actors ranging from Hasanfaus to President Reagan and settings ranging from Nicaragua to Israel to Iran.

This complexity extended to the hearings where a cacophony of voices asked questions, reprimanded lawyers, and presented reams of sometimes contradictory evidence. I suggest that part of North's appeal stemmed from his unified rhetorical vision which extended the familiar cold war rhetorical vision to include Arab terrorism. North's was a coherent, complete vision against a bench of fragmented positions. This coherence was attractive to many Americans. In addition, his rhetorical vision depicted the United States as the defender of the weak and the champion of democracy; therefore, his vision was positive, adding to its attractiveness.

Another part of North's appeal stemmed from his white knight persona who fought three villains: communism, terrorism, and the system. I suggest that many American feel emnity, fear, or frustration toward at least one of these three phenomena. The reason, therefore, that North received such a sympathetic response from many Americans was not that all responding Americans accepted the Cold War rhetorical vision, but they accepted either the Cold War rhetorical vision or one of the other villains North fought.

In addition, many Americans identified with his persona as a clean-cut, patriotic, handsome husband and father who did what he thought was right. A persona described as "magnetic ... in the older style" (Morrow, 1987, 14). Americans often feel powerless and feel that one voice, one vote doesn't matter. They assume a kind of impotence. North demonstrated that one person can make a difference. North's persona as the individualist who stood up for his beliefs, the cowboy who went against conventions, won the hearts and minds of many Americans.

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